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ABSTRACT

A study is reported in which the career satisfaction and sense of personal reward of college professors was examined. The study affirmed the value of the academic life felt by the respondents and revealed the capacity of the two primary tasks of teaching and research to commit individuals to the academic cause and thereby infuse life with meaning. The results of this study are examined in relationship to other studies of academic life and works concerning a sense of calling in life, intrinsic versus extrinsic orientation, idealism, and the source of happiness in life. The conditions in higher education that undermine these feelings are reviewed: part-time work among college faculty, a weakening of the intellectual core of academic work (the simplification of academic work that empties it of advanced content), and the lack of material rewards. Basic reform in higher education is called for to reverse these conditions. (KM)

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THE ABSORBING ERRAND

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BURTON R. CLARK

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THE ABSORBING ERRAND*

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In a materialistic age that measures occupational success in dollars, academic work in the United States marches to a different drummer. Whether located in research universities, four-year colleges, or two-year colleges, professors often refer to their work as a noble activity. Professors find personal reward and social value in their daily rounds as they invest themselves in undergraduate instruction, train graduate students as the next academic generation, create new knowledge through research and critical scholarship, and help preserve the parts of the cultural heritage for which they are centrally responsible. Contrary to the bleak picture of disarray and despair, even greed and sloth, that sometimes has been painted by commentators during the 1970s and 1980s, an intensive study I and associates carried out between 1983 and 1985 found no crisis throughout the profession, no thundering loss of faith and commitment. What we found instead, in one

*Based on Burton R. Clark, The Academic Life: Small Worlds, Different Worlds. Princeton: Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching and Princeton University Press, 1987.

locale after another, was a stubborn, even confident, affirmation of the value of the academic life.

How come? What comprises this affirmation? What lies behind it? If a professor teaching introductory accounting to remedial students in a community college can passionately report exhilarating experiences in the classroom, something unusual must be going on, something intangible that may be readily overlooked, especially when observers come armed with cynical perspectives.

What we encountered time and again was the capacity of the two primary tasks of teaching and research to commit individuals to the academic cause, thereby infusing life with meaning. No matter where we turned among diverse fields of study and quite different types of institutions, we found professors whose eyes lit up and whose voices moved beyond cold objectivity when they spoke about what teaching meant to them, or about why research possessed their souls, or about why the combination of teaching and research, if not the best of all possible worlds, was the nearest thing that earthly employment was going to offer.

A two-year college instructor was not speaking for herself alone, it turned out, when she said, "To me it is not boring. To me it is challenging, to me it is fun, it is exciting.... I like to be up front, I like talking in front of people, I like putting an affect on someone. I like the

ability to light a spark in someone and see that they like that, and to say that I helped that person make a decision.... because [of] what I gave to them and how I dealt with them.... I like the immediate reward that you get from dealing with students -- good, quick recognition." Another community college instructor, who had worked previously in a major corporation, added: "Obviously, we don't get paid very much, and you have to get psychic gratification to make up for that lack of financial rewards.... I can't imagine wanting to go back into a corporation full-time. I didn't find it terribly satisfying... The fundamental mission of [that] organization is unimportant to me. And this mission is important to me."

At the other end of the institutional continuum, in the leading research universities, the rewards of critical thought and inquiry lend considerable zest to the lives of many professors. An early infatuation that became lifelong was expressed by a physicist: "There is no substitute for dealing with the things that we [physicists] deal with. I mean I'm just as crazy about that as I was when I was 14 or 15 years old.... I knew I had this inclination, I just never thought I would do it. And it's the only way." And, in a second case: "Oh, I couldn't do anything else.... If you want to solve problems or do anything original or creative, then it's one of the few places [where] it can be done.... So I'd say if I had

it to do over again, there are a few things I would do differently, but I sure would be a professor again."

The interest in coupling teaching and research stretches strongly into the second- and third-level universities and into the four-year colleges, public and private. A professor of English in a lesser university explained: "My primary goal when I came here was to be an outstanding teacher. I didn't want to be just competent; I wanted to be an outstanding teacher. The other goal that I set for myself was my goal as a scholar, and that was to write well. I wanted people to read what I had to say about Joyce and say 'he writes well on Joyce.' To read someone who writes well and to write well on someone who writes well is, I think, a goal that I set for myself."

In a public comprehensive college not long out of its days as a teachers college, another professor of English came on strong: "I am thoroughly immersed in my discipline, which is English literature. I am of the view that a person teaching in higher education is by definition an active, functioning, publishing scholar. This feeds the teaching, this maintains the enthusiasm, this keeps the juices flowing.... I really don't understand how one can function in the academic setting without being engaged in some research."

In short, to have the research demon by the tail can be a lifelong pleasure, combining a sense of craftsmanship,

originality, and success, and a feeling that the juices are flowing, in teaching as well as in scholarship.

In a very substantial number of our field interviews, we found we were witnessing the triumph of the intrinsic over the extrinsic. Small wonder then that a Carnegie survey of 5,000 academics in 1984 found that an overwhelming proportion of regular faculty were satisfied with their profession, despite a fall in salaries during the preceding decade and much concern about poorly-prepared students. Nine out of ten reported that their present institution was either "a very good place" or "a fairly good place" for them. When asked to respond to the statement "If I had it to do over again, I'd not become a college teacher," only one in five agreed even mildly. Less than one in ten strongly agreed, and they were outnumbered six to one by those who emphatically took the opposite view that they would again become a professor.

Academic jobs, then, retain in considerable measure the capacity to become infused with a sense of calling. As recently defined by Robert Bellah and his associates in their critical assessment of American individualism, (Habits of the Heart, 1985, p. 66), a calling "makes a person's work morally inseparable from his or her life. It subsumes the self into a community of disciplined practice and sound judgment whose activity has meaning and value in itself, not just in the output or profit that results from it." When we are

socialized into a calling, and then possessed by it, we commit ourselves to others in the service of a cause. How does this come about? Academic work frequently hooks self-interest of the narrow sort to interests that encompass others and that connect to ideals. In a prize-winning book in political science, entitled Beyond Adversary Democracy (1980),Jane J. Mansbridge has argued persuasively that many of us as citizens are capable of simultaneously pursuing three forms of interest: an interest that is self-regarding, where our objective is some form of personal gain; an interest that is other-regarding, where our object is to advance the welfare of a group to which we belong; and an interest that is ideal-regarding, where we labor to serve one or more broad social purposes or principles. In my view, modern professionalism aims to fuse these three forms of interest. Academic work is particularly equipped to do so. Certainly we all pursue self-interest of the narrow sort, whether for sheer material gain or for the delights of prestige and higher status; and on every campus we can point to those whose interests stop here. But we can in most locales point to a much larger number who have sincere regard for the advancement of their department and for the learning of their students and for the good name of their institution. They care about peers or students, and generally both.

And higher education remains alive with captivating ideals. How else do we interpret the finding in the Carnegie survey that nine out of ten American professors believe that education is the best hope for improving the human condition. What arrogant nonsense, one is tempted to say. But they -- we -- believe it, in overwhelming numbers. Our in-depth interviews found professors also attached to the belief that they serve society while serving knowledge, by creating, refining, conserving, and disseminating it. They also reported the pursuit of truth as a touchstone, to the point where the worst crime is plagiarism. Plagiarism is a high crime because it entails a theft of knowledge, a stealing of intellectual property that poisons the reward systems. Professors, in various ways, also remain strongly attached to the ideal of academic freedom, and they portray the personal freedom thereby gained as an extremely attractive aspect of academic life.

Many years ago, Henry James wrote that true happiness "consists of getting out of oneself, but the point is not only to get out, you must stay out, and to stay out you must have some absorbing errand." James's literary metaphor is surely akin to the idea of a calling; to the concept of the intrinsic; to the notion that we can be simultaneously self-regarding, other-regarding, and ideal-regarding -- and to the warranted assertion that academic professionalism, in the

America of the late twentieth century, reflects more of the bright side than the dark side of the coin of professionalization. I can estimate with some confidence that a good share of the people in this audience have found absorbing errands in the academic world. Why would any of us think that most of our colleagues in other academic posts, in other fields of study, in institutions other than our own, have not? They have. When we go out to talk with them, to listen to them in the fullness of their own terms -- and do so in locations away from the public settings where they put on the masks of cold objectivity and critical detachment -- their absorption in academic errands shines through.

That's the good news. Now for the bad news.

The bad news is that there are powerful conditions that undermine all that I have highlighted. There are conditions that have evolved in our system of higher education that weaken the intrinsic rewards, that push self-interest away from the embrace of other-regarding and ideal-regarding interests, that run down the absorbing errands that motivate and satisty.

What are these conditions? The most important one by far is part-time work. For good short-run reasons, academic managers, often joined by rank-structure faculty, have moved something like one-third of all academics onto part-time status. Many community colleges, and a goodly number of

four-year colleges, have a half or more of their faculty on part-time assignment. This shift has been a disaster for the professoriate. The many terms used by part-timers and others denote the deeply troubling position they are in: gypsy scholars, displaced academics, migrant laborers of academe, academic proletariate, marginal academics, disposable dons, freeway scholars. All serve in a market for piecework. Nothing deprofessionalizes an occuption faster and more thoroughly than the transformation of fulltime posts into part-time labor. And the part-timers are the first ones to say so, as they report the dismal conditions of work and status under which they labor, the straight-out exploitation to which they are subjected, the intense brutalizing of the ideals of profession they experience.

The second condition that reduces our absorbing errands is more difficult to specify and more subject to misunderstanding. It entails a weakening of the intellectual core of academic work. It is most prevalent where instructors teach only introductory materials of the most general sort, and then often to poorly prepared students. Hence it is a particularly threatening condition in the open-door community colleges that are overloaded with remedial work, and in four-year colleges that admit applicants without regard to preparation and ability. The energies of college teachers then become concentrated on introductory subject-matter, and

some members of the staff have to work with students who are initially functioning at a ninth grade, or a sixth grade, or even a third grade level. In crude terms, the subject-matter has to be "dumbed down," often twice over. The effect on teachers is to erode the vitality that comes from commitment to subject and the related identity as scholar. When the subject base is only elementary, intellectual juices may well stop flowing.

Open access and an eager search for clientele in postsecondary education have major costs with which we have yet to seriously reckon. Only true missionaries -- always in short supply -- can maintain a calling, an absorbing errand, when the promise of career is reduced to a lifetime of teaching largely remedial composition, or remedial mathematics, for a revolving-door clientele that is easy in and quickly out. The simplification of academic work that empties it of advanced content is a substantial threat to the vitality of the academic profession, a condition that appears to bring more harm than all the intense specialization about which American reformers have routinely complained.

The third adverse condition is one that has been widely discussed: the lessening of material rewards. There are limits to how much "psychic satisfaction" can substitute for the paycheck. The old car needs a new motor; the house needs its leaky roof repaired; and braces for the children's teeth

become a necessity for those who read books, attend art movies, and identify themselves as intellectuals. Lack of money is one of the two chief complaints of academics in our discussions with them -- "the biggest problem is [that] the pay is not good enough" -- the other being, as mentioned earlier, the poor preparation of students. The material rewards do count for something, often a lot, and in the 1970s and early 1980s, in some fields and in many institutions, they had not kept pace.

Basic reform in higher education -- reform that takes seriously the fundamental structure of the system and the systematic constraints and rewards under which academics operate -- needs to address these conditions. Responsible institutional action can chip away at the overload of part-time work to bring it down to a level where the faculty core of institutions is measurably strengthened. As Ernest Boyer has recommended in the foreword to my book, The Academic Life (1987), institutions need to justify educationally as well as financially why, for example, more than 20 percent of faculty teaching undergraduates should be part-time. Salary deprivation can be altered also, with apparently some improvement in many institutions in the last several years. Academics are better paid, of course, when they are in short supply rather than in oversupply, and the academic labor market should evolve in this direction in the 1990s.

The toughest condition to change is the one involving the simplifying of academic work to the point of a virtual loss of subject-matter. This one cuts deep into the identity of teachers as scholars, especially when the global reference group includes faculty in the research universities and the selective four-year colleges. But if this condition were raised to a higher level of consciousness in those community colleges and non-selective four-year colleges where it is pervasive, and there defined as a major problem, a number of incremental steps could be taken. Those teaching only introductory materials need professional associations, or parts thereof, that are appropriate to their interests; and this process is underway (for example, a Community College Humanities Association, a Community College Social Science Association). These first-tier instructors need regular contact with subject-matter counterparts in four-year colleges and universities. And they need a sabbatical clock that works, and that can be sped up. Nothing makes the intellectual juices flow again more than a year back in the university library, advanced seminars, and laboratories. For the great majority of academics, disciplinary involvement is a key anchoring point. Then, too, staff can be differentiated so that some members, lodged in learning resource centers, identify themselves and support one another as learning specialists -- another small evolution that is well underway.

In conclusion, I want to stress that what we see in the academic world depends very much upon where we look. American academic life is very uneven. In the world's most diverse system of higher education, the professoriate is enormously differentiated by type of institution as well as by disciplinary specialization. Hence we cannot speak clearly and act effectively when we think in a simplistic fashion about "the professor in the college," or "the university professor." Simple statements to the effect that professors do not teach enough, or professors spend too much time doing research, become nonsense. Many professors in sectors we can clearly identify teach too much rather than too little. And in those sectors one can readily make the case, as our respondents did, that academics have too little time for scholarly renewal, let alone for research, rather than too much. Context is everything. Those who wish to shape public policy on higher education become sophisticated and relevant only as they learn to speak in the language of differentiation, specifying what settings they have in mind when they try to make one point or another. And it clearly does not hurt if researchers get out of their offices, away from their computers, and enter into sustained discussion with colleagues in farflung locales.

As we root around in the different worlds, the many small worlds, of academe, what should occupy our attention the most

is the strength of academic errands. Supporting conditions for these errands vary from one field to another, and from one institution to another. But the basic tasks of teaching and research are inherently attractive forms of work, and it takes massive adverse conditions to reduce seriously the strength of the academic calling in the system as a whole. The faculty remains the central resource, the key asset, for institution building: and sturdy institutional character depends on their deep commitment. Thus, as observers or administrators or policymakers, we need to attend to the conditions that help, and the conditions that hinder, the forging of a commitment by faculty in which narrow self-interest is hooked to the twin chariots of service to others and service to ideals.

At the heart of the matter are the ways by which teaching and research (and college administration!) exert their fascinations. Why do we so often invest our sum of living in our academic assignments? Why do we so often attempt to ignore the need to sleep, and to treat the flesh as a piece of torn luggage that the spirit must drag after it? Whatever the fuller explanations, those of us who work in higher education are more advantaged than abused by the simple fact that our work so readily becomes a haunting and haunted business. At the least we come to know that there is more, much more, to life than getting and spending.